



Maturity not phoney war

The federal election is only a few days away and, as predicted, defence issues have yet to seriously raise their profile in the hurly burly of political debate or as a matter of concern in the electorate at large. This is essentially a good thing. It stems from both main parties recognising the chronic and prolonged under-investment in defence that occurred, under both their watches, during the 1973-1999 period and their agreement as to the undoubted need to reverse it.

Both the coalition and Labor remain committed to current levels of investment in renewing our defence capabilities. They also agree on the need to continue the annual three per cent real increases in defence spending. Both agree that the ADF needs to be bigger and there are no substantial disagreements on where this is necessary and how it should be achieved. Labor has declared it would not cancel any of the ongoing major re-equipment projects (destroyers, amphibious ships, new air combat capability, self-propelled artillery, etc). Where there is disagreement among the main parties it is at the margins and generally revolves around how things should be done, not why.

Unusually, this election is also being conducted in wartime but is not a wartime election in either the traditional or modern sense, particularly in the view of the electorate. There is general bipartisan agreement on the Afghanistan commitment but some differences over the commitment to Iraq, although many seem more apparent than real.

There is perhaps disagreement regarding the degree to which these wars are related (largely due to differing perceptions as to their causes and how 'winnable' they might be). But there is underlying agreement that they both involve aspects of the wider conflict with inchoate and franchised Islamist extremism.

Neither side of politics sees electoral benefit in drawing attention to the areas of agreement but some electoral advantage in professing the opposite. The most prominent issue of ostensible difference is our ground combat force in Southern Iraq. But it is more likely than not, no matter which party holds office in the second half of next year, that the Overwatch Battle Group will be withdrawn as part of wider realignments in US-led coalition operations at that time. •

New tang of change in the air

Interestingly and refreshingly, Labor has declared it will tackle reforms in some areas where it has traditionally taken the opposite tack. The chief one of these is the stated intention to reform the Department of Defence bureaucracy by reducing its size and complexity, a complete turnaround from the approach under previous Labor administrations. This probably stems in large part from the generational change from Kim Beazley to Kevin Rudd.

Highlights:

- Few differences in defence issues between the parties
- What might Labor do with Defence and how?
- Who might do it?
- What do Julia Gillard and Mark Vaile have in common?
- Resignation about a Department of Homeland Security
- Giveaway of clapped-out Leopard tanks tells a sad story
- Stringent safeguards needed for any ADF DNA database

Such reform would be assisted by the decline in practice (if not in ADF folklore) over recent years of the unwarranted and high levels of civilian bureaucratic interference in military professional matters that were prevalent in the 1974-2000 period. Such aberrations from correct constitutional practice had their organisational and cultural genesis under previous Labor governments – although they perhaps peaked in the first few years of the current government.

Labor has also signalled an interest in tackling the second wave of reforms recommended in the Kinnaird review, particularly the outsourcing of many project management functions now undertaken in-house by the DMO. This may not be possible but seems worth trying, even if only on an experimental basis initially so as to find out one way or the other.

There is many a slip betwixt cup and lip, especially when the bureaucracy's barons attempt to snow an incoming ministerial team and distract them from adopting a first-principles approach. In general, however, this time around there are few legitimate professional concerns being expressed in the department and the ADF compared to the last two occasions there was a prospective change of government. •

Shuffling not clearing the decks

Labor is unlikely to shift the current Secretary of the Department of Defence. He has been in the job only a year and remains respected by both sides of politics.

There is also no internal candidate capable of replacing him and few elsewhere, particularly one who could do the job and wants to. As one of four principal contenders to head DFAT eventually under a Labor administration, a subsequent move for Nick Warner remains a possibility but is unlikely while those such as Dennis Richardson or Allan Gyngell are more readily available.

Similarly, Labor's relations with the senior officers of the ADF appear good. The contracts of the CDF and Service Chiefs expire next July and a new Labor administration would soon have to think about a reshuffle or new blood. Despite the hopes of some of the more ambitious two-stars, a general purge is unlikely. Although many in the country tend to forget we are at war, Labor seems to have a good understanding of the additional command pressures the ADF's chiefs have been under in recent years. It may very well be that the CDF will not accept an extension even if one is offered, but there are at least two capable candidates to replace him and each Service has a manageable transition plan.

It remains uncertain who might be the Minister for Defence in a Rudd administration as Kevin Rudd has stated not all shadows might become ministers. Joel Fitzgibbon appears to want the job and has grown into an interest in defence matters since being appointed, on a make-or-break basis, after his close involvement with the Latham experiment. A big part of his job over this election year has been to keep defence off the front pages and this has largely occurred. Another possibility as minister is Senator John Faulkner, a very capable minister in the Keating government (including the junior portfolio in Defence 1993-94), and well known for his long memory and attention to detail at Senate estimates committee hearings on defence matters. An outside possibility is the previous shadow spokesman, Robert McClelland, should a far-reaching frontbench reshuffle occur. Only one man really might know and even then probably not yet. •

Achieving real ministerial grip

The choice of minister would be important but more important will be the overall structure of ministerial supervision. The ADA has long recommended to all parties that reform of the Department of Defence, and improved and proper civil control of the military (meaning by ministers not bureaucrats), both need to start with increased and dedicated ministerial supervision.

A senior minister supported by two *full-time* junior ministers in the Defence portfolio, one looking after DSTO and DMO and the other the ADF, would be a most effective first step in tackling the portfolio's deep-seated and inter-related problems of size, span, complexity, lack of or suffused accountability, and excessive ministerial and senior official/commander workloads.

Governments of both persuasions have too often treated the junior ministerial responsibilities in the defence portfolio as an 'add-on' to the Veterans Affairs portfolio, and/or as a political reward for a factional hack or a means of raising the profile of a marginal seat holder. As the Billson and Faulkner exceptions show it can work but rarely does. The time has come to break this politically expedient nexus between veterans' affairs and defence matters in order to remove temptation from future prime-ministers and stop the ADF being stuck with duds. ●

Traditional me-too-ism

Concern has been expressed in defence circles that if Labor wins the election we would have a deputy prime-minister with absolutely no record of interest or expertise in defence issues. While an understandable worry, this is essentially a 'glass half empty' view. The 'glass half full' view would be that such a situation would merely provide another area of policy continuity with the current government. ●

Homeland security

The prospect of a Department of Homeland Security being instituted by Labor is meeting little enthusiasm from police and security intelligence professionals in particular. Support among other specialisations is stronger, especially in some of the smaller law enforcement agencies where they see opportunities for better resourcing and some rationalisation. But many fear another Russell Offices-type bureaucratic monstrosity would eventuate.

Care will have to be taken too not to undermine the very successful innovation of Border Protection Command, the joint Defence-Customs agency that controls or co-ordinates most of our offshore sovereignty enforcement measures.

Labor remains wedded to the idea so facial exercises in grinning and bearing are likely to be the go in affected agencies. ●

Tanks a lot

The Army's decommissioned Leopard tanks have been broken up into job lots and made available for static purposes such as monuments and children's playgrounds. Their residual military utility is so low they cannot be sold, even to a third-world military force or film company.

And yet, until quite recently, these mid-1970s era tanks constituted our Army's only heavy armoured capability and were all we had if needed. The last time they were seriously considered for operational use was during the 1999 East Timor crisis. A squadron was placed on 24-hours notice-to-move and pre-positioned on the wharf in Darwin. This was done so they could swiftly reinforce our heavily outnumbered and light-scales infantry forces as they deployed into a volatile Dili full of Indonesian troops and militias controlled by the Indonesian

military. Luckily no serious combat eventuated, but it very well could have even if only by tactical accident or ABRI indiscipline. Our tanks would then have been an essential force multiplier on the ground. There is also little doubt that their presence and readiness to move were duly noted by the Indonesian consulate in Darwin and therefore they played a deterrent and de-escalatory role even without leaving Australia.

The Army's new 59-vehicle strong tank force is very small in both relative and absolute terms. Yet the Army possessing even this quite limited capability is apt to excite strong criticism from certain academic quarters and public commentators. In general, the vehemence of their objections is inversely proportional to the facts and logic of their arguments – and their military experience. Quite ludicrous fibs are regularly paraded about the supposed unsuitability of tanks in the region or about their alleged lack of utility for certain types of operational task.

Similar arguments were used in the late 1980s and 1990s to prevent the Leopards being upgraded or replaced. The result of this is that the Leopards are now so clapped out they are going straight to museums and the front gardens of RSL Clubs.

The proof of the pudding is in the eating with their eventual disposal. Those responsible for this should hang their heads in shame rather than continue to parade their ideological prejudices by telling similar fibs about the 'hardening and networking the army' initiative. These critics were, and remain, prepared to gamble with the lives of Australian diggers by denying them the protection and tactical advantages of tanks – but only because of academic theories and armchair prognostications. Even with its new M1 Abrams tanks our Army is still overwhelmingly a light-scales, light infantry based force. Of its future eight infantry battalions only two will be mechanised. Arguments that the Army somehow needs to be further lightened for constabulary tasks in the region are based on false assumptions and simply defy reality. They completely ignore that it is already a predominantly light-scales force, especially in comparison to comparable countries. ●

DNA database requires strict safeguards

A compulsory DNA database has been suggested for defence force personnel deploying on overseas operations in order to assist with post-mortem identification of fatal casualties. Although instances of casualties being classified missing presumed dead, or unidentified, declined dramatically over the course of the 20th Century, the enduring nature of combat means the proposal continues to make sense – but only if it involves appropriate privacy safeguards. These safeguards must be enshrined by statute and include severe penalties (including lengthy imprisonment) for abuses.

Safeguards need to cover four key areas. First, after an individual's DNA sequence is recorded in the database all their physical samples must be destroyed. Second, access to the database must be strictly controlled and limited to forensic medicine units specialising in disaster victim identification. Third, database entries should be purged after 60 years. Finally, and most importantly, the purpose for which the database can be used must be limited solely to post-mortem identification of casualties. The governing statute must expressly forbid the information to be used for any other purpose such as insurance screening, paternity testing or criminal investigations.

To achieve operational effectiveness members of our defence force already give up certain rights that the wider community take for granted. No matter whether this DNA database is compulsory or voluntary, it should not be instituted until the appropriate legislation is in place to ensure the above safeguards exist. ●